Claims:

1. A method of implementing a control channel for exchanging information between switching devices in a packet switched communications network, comprising: selecting an unused portion of a packet format used for communicating between switching devices; and embedding control information in the unused portion.

2. The method as defined in claim 1 wherein said communications network is an Ethernet network.
3. The method as defined in claim 2 wherein said Ethernet network is a Gigabit Ethernet network.
4. The method as defined in claim 3 wherein said unused portion is in an eight octet preamble frame.
5. The method as defined in claim 4 wherein said a third octet of said preamble frame contains a special code to signify that following frames contain control information.
6. The method as defined in claim 5 wherein said control information is embedded in three octets following said third octet,
7. The method as defined in claim 6 wherein said three octets having embedded control information have a distinctive, high order bit.
8. The method as defined in claim 1 wherein said switching devices are managed as a group of switches in a clustered arrangement.
9. The method as defined in claim 8 wherein said control information relates to disable and enable flow control.

10. The method as defined in claim 8 wherein said control information relates to transmission priority of packets between switching devices.
11. The method as defined in claim 8 wherein said control information relates to results of a hash algorithm implemented as between ports within said cluster.
12. The method as defined in claim 8 wherein said control information relates to ports making up a mirrored pair involving a switch cluster.
13. The method as defined in claim 8 wherein said control information relates to multicast packet protocols distributed to cluster switches within said network.
14. A system for implementing a control channel for use in exchanging information between switching devices in a packet switched communications network, comprising:
means to select an unused portion of a packet format used to carry communication between switching devices; and
means to embed control information in the unused portion.

15. The method as defined in claim 14 wherein said communications network is the Ethernet.
16. The method as defined in claim 14 wherein said communications network is a Gigabit Ethernet.